



U.S. Immigration
and Customs
Enforcement

March 8, 2006

News Release

Livonia man who forced women to work as strippers pleads guilty

Ukrainian women tricked into traveling to the U.S., then forced to work at area strip clubs

DETROIT — A Michigan man pleaded guilty here today in U.S. District Court to involuntary servitude and money laundering conspiracies, announced U.S. Attorney Stephen Murphy, Eastern District of Michigan, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Special Agent-in-Charge Brian Moskowitz, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Special Agent-in-Charge Daniel D. Roberts.

Aleksandr Masimenko, 26, a naturalized U.S. citizen born in the Ukraine, who resided in Livonia, Mich., pleaded guilty before U.S. District Judge Victoria A. Roberts for his part in a conspiracy to force Eastern European women to work as exotic dancers in Detroit-area strip clubs. Michail Aronov, a Lithuanian citizen from the Chicago area and associate of Masimenko, pleaded guilty to similar charges in September 2005.

ICE began the investigation after information was received regarding Eastern European women being trafficked in the Detroit area under the guise of legitimate business. Masimenko admitted today that he and his partners smuggled women into the United States and compelled them through threats and coercion to work as dancers in strip clubs. To maintain compliance from the women, Maksimenko and his partners took a number of steps, including: confiscating the dancers' passports, imposing large debts, enforcing rules designed to isolate the dancers from potential rescuers through interrogations, monetary penalties, physical violence and threats, searching the dancers' apartments, and threatening to turn the dancers in to authorities because of their illegal immigration status. According to Aronov's plea agreement, Maksimenko forced the dancers to engage in sexual relations with him, regardless of their desires or consent, by intimidating and threatening them with arrest and deportation, and by reminding them that they owed him a debt for employing them.

"These criminals preyed upon the hopes and dreams of these victims who came to the U.S. for the sole purpose of bettering their lot in life, only to be forced into a life of enslavement, subjected to sexual exploitation, physical violence, and isolation," said Moskowitz, special agent-in-charge of the ICE Office of Investigations in Detroit. "ICE will continue to vigorously pursue those organizations that callously trade in human cargo, with no regard for the health or dignity these women, all while reaping the profits from their suffering."

"The defendants in this case took advantage of Eastern European women by enticing them to come the United States and then holding them in bondage for commercial and sexual exploitation," said U.S. Attorney Stephen J. Murphy. "The courage shown by two of these women in escaping and bringing their condition to the attention of law enforcement brought an end to their involuntary servitude and to the violence and intimidation perpetrated by the defendants. Criminal operations involving human trafficking, such as this one, will be pursued with the greatest vigor by my office."

"With greed as their sole motivation, and devoid of any regard for human dignity, these traffickers egregiously exploited their victims, all of whom were vulnerable women who were subjected to an existence of misery," said Wan J. Kim, Assistant Attorney General for the Civil Rights Division. "Today's guilty plea demonstrates our commitment to protect the civil rights of trafficking victims. The Department of Justice will continue to pursue and prosecute all those who would attempt to profit at the expense of another's freedom."

With today's plea, seven people have now been convicted of crimes associated with this trafficking conspiracy. Evgeniy Prokopenko and Alexander Bondarenko, two Ukrainian citizens residing in Brooklyn, NY., pleaded guilty to visa fraud in September. They admitted that they entered into sham marriages in 2004 with two of the dancers in order to permit the dancers to gain entry into the United States. On Nov. 1, 2005, Anna Gonikman-Starchenko, a Ukrainian citizen living in the Detroit metro area, pleaded guilty to obstruction-related charges stemming from actions taken following the arrests of Maksimenko and Aronov. On Nov. 3, 2005, Niki Papoutsaki, a Greek citizen living in the Detroit metro area, pleaded guilty to misprision of a felony in connection with obstruction-related activity. Finally, on Feb. 14, 2006, Valentina Maksimenko, a naturalized U.S. citizen residing in the Chicago area, pleaded guilty to a conspiracy to obstruct justice during the course of the federal investigation.

Maksimenko faces a statutory maximum sentence of up to 40 years in prison under the Federal Sentencing Guidelines. The specific sentence will be determined by the Court following a sentencing hearing to determine whether Maksimenko sexually abused any of the dancers. The Court may seek restitution and a forfeiture money judgment of at least \$957,050 against Maksimenko.

ICE, the FBI, the Internal Revenue Service, Criminal Investigation, and the State Department Diplomatic Security Service are providing investigative assistance. Assistant U.S. Attorney Mark Chutkow and Lou de Baca, Senior Litigation Counsel at the Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Criminal Section, are prosecuting the case. Peter Ziedas, Assistant U.S. Attorney is handling the asset forfeiture part of the case.

ICE

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was established in March 2003 as the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security. ICE is comprised of four integrated divisions that form a 21st century law enforcement agency with broad responsibilities for a number of key homeland security priorities.